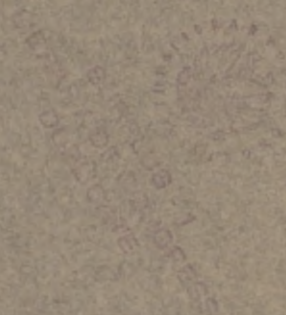


R  
727  
B88  
COPY 2





Class

~~R 727~~

Book

~~.B 88~~

~~Copy 2~~

# RECIPROCAL RESPONSIBILITIES.

## AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED ON THE PART OF THE FACULTY AT THE FORTY-FIRST COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES OF THE MEDICAL DEPARTMENT OF GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY, AT LINCOLN HALL, ON MAY 5, 1890,

BY

*over*  
SWAN M. BURNETT, M. D., PH. D.,

*"*  
*Professor of Ophthalmology and Otology in the University; Ophthalmic and Aural Surgeon to Providence Hospital and to the Garfield Hospital; Director of the Eye and Ear Clinic at the Central Dispensary and Emergency Hospital; President of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia.*

WASHINGTON :  
PUBLISHED BY THE FACULTY.  
1890.



## Reciprocal Responsibilities.

---

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: We, of the faculty, feel that we are here on sufferance. This is not *our* night. We have had ours for seven months for each of the last three years, but this night is peculiarly that of these young gentlemen who have just received their certificates of admission to the ranks of a learned and liberal profession. This is their night, their hour, the goal towards which they have for three years—often in weariness of mind and body, but with steadfast purpose—kept the eye of their ambition and hope. We are now only auxiliary to the occasion—mere spectators of their triumphs—the delighted witnesses of their well-earned success.

From time immemorial almost, however, it has been the custom among medical colleges to have one of the faculty utter a few words of farewell to the outgoing class and bid them Godspeed in the uncertain journey upon which they



we share these feelings in common with you, mothers and sweethearts! For these many months past they have been our "boys" too. Their faces have looked down upon us from the amphitheater of the lecture-room in earnest attention, night after night, with minds alert and open for the reception of whatever knowledge we were there to impart. And, though each year we have to give up to the great world outside a portion of our family, we can never forget that these mother's sons are, in a sense, our sons too, and we shall watch over them, in the great work of their lives, with all the interest of *alma mater*.

But in giving them back to you it seems not out of place to review briefly, for our mutual benefit, let us hope, the relations between these young men and the community among which they will exercise their newly-acquired skill.

There are many circumstances which make the relation of the doctor to society in general one of peculiar interest. It is both public and personal in a way that is not given to any other body of men.

In matters of hygiene and public health, in the protection of the community against epidemics and the spread of disease, and in the dissemination of instruction in regard to the proper mode of living and working, both by individuals and in large bodies; in fact, in regard to all questions which affect the bodily well-being of mankind in the mass, he deals with matters second in importance to none with which organized society has to do.

That plagues and pestilences do not sweep over the land to the extent they did in former times is due to the knowledge obtained by the researches and discoveries of medical science, and mostly by men engaged actively in the practice of their art; and it is claimed, and there are figures to support the assertion, that at least ten years have been added to the average length of human life by these discoveries within the last fifty years. It is not my purpose nor is this the occasion to catalogue all the triumphs medicine has achieved during the last few decades. It would be straining too much the quality of modesty, which is one of the distinguishing traits of the individual members of that unassuming profession.

But these facts are more than an open secret—they are a part of the history of the progress of the Age, and they are alluded to only to show that in the great advances of modern civilization the profession which these young men from to-night represent has at least kept pace with the rest, and has been no laggard in the hand to hand contest humanity is waging against its own weaknesses, death and disease. In this public capacity the profession has come to hold, in recent times, a position of responsibility, honor, and respect, of which it has never shown itself undeserving, and discussions of questions in sanitation and hygiene have become almost as popular as those in theology, politics, or sociology in general. But sanitation and hygiene could have no existence on a scientific basis but for the

experiments that have been carried on, and are still being carried on, in the laboratories of our medical colleges and hospitals, on the physiology of living beings, and investigation into the various causes which pervert the normal functions into pathological conditions and actions. For whatever has been accomplished in the prevention and limitation in the spread of disease must be placed to the credit of the profession which these young men have entered to-night, and moreover, we guarantee to you, through the diplomas which we have conferred upon them here in your presence, that they have been instructed in the best methods of investigation and are armed and equipped with the preliminary knowledge for a further and proper study of all the questions which relate to public health, the prevention of disease, and its cure or alleviation when already established. Further than this we cannot go; further than this it is not possible for any collegiate instruction to go. We have tried to make our experience their knowledge, and, quite as important still, we have endeavored to find, with them, the limits of our actual acquirements, to teach them that the most important knowledge is the knowledge of our ignorance. Till we know what we don't know we can never properly know what we do know. Did it ever occur to you that the doctor is pre-eminently a searcher after truth? Most other men have some bias, either of dogma, of interest, or of opinion, but the physician's constant aim is to see things in the pure white light of abso-



lute verity. His whole professional life is spent in unraveling the tangled threads in the skein of evidence presented by deranged functions, and in giving to each manifestation its value, and its proper and only value in its relation to the others. In no other avocation in life is the judicial frame of mind called more constantly into requisition than in the daily practice of the conscientious physician.

We have, among other things, tried to teach these young men not only what is the actual value of drugs in the management of disease, but also the limits of their usefulness and the dangers of over-medication. We have endeavored to induct them into the study of the natural history of disease, and the powers of nature to throw off, unaided by drugs, the burden of morbid influences when they are given a proper opportunity to exercise their functions. When, therefore, any one of these men comes to minister to your relief when you are ill, and does not at once fill your stomach with all the contents of an apothecary-shop, do not consider, for a moment, that it is from any lack of knowledge of drug-action, but because he knows not only when to give medicine, but when not to. He is only carrying out the truth that we have tried to teach him, that any fool can go to the medicine-chest and dose out drugs, but he is the wise man who knows when to abstain, and that the chief office of the medical attendant is to tell people what not to do or take.

And when we come to consider, further, the physician in what may be termed his private capacity, in his personal relations with individual man and woman, his position becomes one which, in confidence and trust, is exceeded by no other. What man is more relied upon than the doctor? In whom do you confide as you do in your physician? You tell him things you would tell no other human being, and it is a trust that is so seldom betrayed that an instance of its breach is always a cause of righteous indignation and surprise. We look for trustworthiness in a physician with the same certainty as we expect virtue in woman. And so far has this become a fixed belief among men that that merciless critic and mirror of life—the stage—has seldom given us a doctor for a villain. His ministrations are not confined to the diseased body, but, perhaps, quite as important still, extend to the perturbed spirit, to the disordered mind when it becomes “like sweet bells jangled—out of tune.” Few of you but have experienced the mental relief which the sound of his longed-for footsteps brings, and but know the comfort that radiates from his thoughtful yet often cheerful face. His eyes are the first to look upon us on our entrance into the turmoil of an earthly existence, and among the last to gaze upon us when we come to lay the weary burden down and enter upon an eternal rest.

He comes when we call, he shares our joys, and bears with us the burdens of our sorrows, and that, too, as a rule,

without ostentation or complaint, and with no assumption of undue importance. To him life is more serious and earnest and grander and nobler than to most men. He has opportunities that are accorded to few to know how much of unselfishness and love and ennobling patience and courage belong to our frail humanity. And I will confess to you—and the confession must not be accepted as egotistical as it sounds, since I am only a piece of a doctor—not a whole one—one of those specialists, as they are called, who found that he wasn't capable of taking in the whole of the body, but must be content with doing the best he could with a study of a small part of it—I must confess, I say, that I have often wondered how men and women can lie down in their beds and sleep peacefully night after night without the consciousness that they have contributed to the relief of any human suffering. The doctor has that anodyne every day of his life—that is, when he hasn't such a big a dose of it as to keep him awake the whole of the night—and it goes far to make up to him for the great draughts constantly made upon his bodily and mental strength. In fact, there is nothing in his professional life to develop anything but the best that is in him. There is no sort of an excuse for the doctor being a mean or dishonorable man, and if he turns out to be a scoundrel it is because there was more bad than good in him to begin with, and even the medical profession couldn't save him. Depend upon it, he would have been much worse if he had been anything else.

These apparently most egotistical utterances are made not for the purpose of "magnifying our office," but to call to your minds and those of these young physicians not only the responsibilities of the profession, but the ideal that has been raised for them to live up to.

But responsibilities in life are never unilateral. The universal law which seeks for proper adjustment and balance is applicable here as elsewhere, and for a few moments I desire to call your earnest attention to some of *your* duties as citizens and members of the community. You must bear in mind that you, yourselves, are, in a large measure, responsible for the kind of doctors you have. While, as I have said, the career of a physician is calculated to call forth only that which is best in him, it is evident that, if you want mental and moral qualities of the first rank in the profession, you must give some sort of guarantee that these qualities shall have at least the same recognition here as are accorded to them elsewhere. If you want the best doctors you must encourage the best material to enter the profession.

It is not, I know, a safe thing to make general statements, but I think the intelligence and culture of a community can be very well judged by its doctors. Many of you may remember that old story of the Methodist circuit-rider who, at the end of his year's hard labor, found his cash assets to amount to two dollars and fifty cents. Going up to Conference in the autumn he was interrogated by his Bishop as to



the religious interests of his late circuit, and as to the kind of man they would probably want to succeed him. "Well," said the preacher, "my experience would lead me to say that the requirements of the Bald Knob circuit would be properly met by a \$2.50 preacher, if you have one." Now, it is not too much to say that it rests largely with you as to whether you will have two-dollar-and-half doctors or those of the other kind. As ye are, so, also, shall your doctors be.

In reply to this laying on of responsibility, you may say that it is not the province of the community to educate physicians, that this is the professed duty of the medical colleges and hospitals which we represent. That is perfectly true, and we have no desire to shirk any of the duty thus imposed, but what we have a right to demand, and what we do demand at your hands, is a fair chance and full opportunity of furnishing you with what we know to be the best, and the power to exclude the unworthy. It is mainly because we are hampered by too much freedom—if we may use a paradox—that we have not approached more nearly to our own ideal in this country. The responsibility of medical practice is made, by law, too easy of acquirement, and thus pretention, arrogance, ignorance, and assumption have equal chances in the race with ability, modesty, and scientific acquirement. So long as the laws made by your representatives render it a possibility for an M. D. to be manufactured after two short

courses of lectures, and often very poor ones at that, and so long as it is not illegal for any presumptuous ignoramus to assume, unchallenged, the title of doctor, and can ply his arts and artifices in opposition to the properly-qualified physician and surgeon, so long must the community be responsible for an opprobrium which rests upon the medical profession, as a mass, in this country, as it does in no other civilized nation on earth.

The American nation, as a people, are responsible for the conditions which make it possible for German medical institutions to refuse to recognize the diplomas from any medical college in the United States. Not that some of these are not as good and efficient as are to be found anywhere, but because the laws of the land recognize and authorize the innumerable diploma mills all over the country, which turn out wholesale, and with total disregard of qualification, any and all sorts of the genus Doctor. It is your duty to change all that. It is your duty, through your representatives in Legislatures and in Congress, to protect yourselves and a liberal and cultured profession against charlatanry, ignorance, and imposture. This protection is certainly a legitimate province of Government, if it have one. Before a man is allowed to assume the functions of a physician or surgeon, let him be compelled to furnish the evidence of his qualification by a successful examination before a board of competent men, selected by the governing powers, and who have no interest, personal

or pecuniary, in the result of that examination. No reputable medical college in the country is opposed to this, and we, of Georgetown College, are not afraid to meet such a test of our teaching. With a bill embodying these features now before Congress, it is your evident duty as good citizens, for your own protection and ours, to see that it is passed—and passed promptly and enforced.

See to it that the study of Anatomy—the foundation of surgery and the handmaid of medical practice—is made possible in this District without the possibility of the stigma of crime being attached to it. Give us an anatomy Act—such as is in force, I believe, in every State in the Union, and certainly in every one where medical teaching is carried on to any extent—which shall give a sense of security to the community as to the undisturbed repose of their lost loved ones, and make the pursuit of necessary knowledge not liable to punishment by fine and imprisonment. The absence of such a law on the statute-books of this District you should see rectified at once, and for your own sakes; for, depend upon it, the doctor has no interests which are not shared by the community in which he lives and labors.

These, among others, are responsibilities which rest upon you, and which should be assumed by you in simple justice to a class of intelligent, hard-working, liberal-minded citizens who have consecrated their lives to the preservation of your health and the lengthening of your

days in comfort here upon earth. If these are fulfilled as they should be, and as we have every reason to believe they will be, on your part, I, in behalf of my colleagues and these young gentlemen who have to-day enrolled themselves in the grand army which fights, under the black flag, against death and disease, will guarantee the fulfillment, on their part, of this compact made by them to-night, and which your presence here, with music and flowers, is intended to ratify and confirm. Let us all live up to it in the highest and noblest interpretation of its spirit.

To you, newly-fledged doctors, there remains little to be said by us. If we have not taught you how to become physicians during these weary months now ended, a few words at parting can certainly not make up the fault. You have had enough of us for the present, I fancy, and are glad to be relieved from the thralldom of the classroom, and are eager to assume your new responsibilities. I wish it were in my power to advise you with certain wisdom, but my observation is that advice to novices is of but little use, and that not altogether from the fact that they are not willing to take it. No man can give another a sure receipt for success, because no two men ever achieve success in exactly the same way. But there are one or two suggestions which I would throw out to you at parting, like the traditional old slipper, for luck, and which I hope you may not altogether forget, for the sake of your



own manhood. Always be yourself. Never be an imitation of some one else, and never strive for success by the apparently successful methods of another which are not in perfect harmony with that which is best and noblest in you. Better be a failure in the eyes of the world than a miserable disappointment to this best self. After all, we are men with Divine aspirations and Immortal Individualities before we are doctors, or lawyers, or priests, or merchants. Be true, therefore, to that Divinity which is within you—listen often to her low, sweet voice—and, whatever betide you, your life is a success. “What thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” Let no ambition be too exalted for your aim. “Hitch your wagon to a star.”











